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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE PROGRAMME OF THE UNITED NATIONS
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Fiftieth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 537th MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Tuesday, 5 October 1999, at 3 p.m.

Chairman: Mr. PEREZ-HERNANDEZ (Spain)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

ANNUAL THEME: STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIP TO ENSURE PROTECTION, ALSO IN RELATION TO SECURITY (A/AC.96/923) (continued)

1. Mrs. ROBINSON (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) said that UNHCR's aims and work were closely linked with those of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR). Refugee protection must be considered within the broader framework of human rights, violations of which always lay behind forced migration, refugee outflows and internal displacement. The recent atrocities in Kosovo and East Timor were good illustrations of that and the two organizations should seek to ensure that action was taken at an early stage to prevent human rights violations resulting in such crises.

2. Prevention was vital, both to avert humanitarian disaster and to prevent a critical situation deteriorating further. Prevention was by no means a new concept, yet it had not always received sufficient attention or resources - an omission that had often had dire consequences. In East Timor, for example, steps could undoubtedly have been taken to prevent a campaign of terror being waged against a people who had exercised their right to self-determination. In Kosovo, nothing had been done despite 10 years of warnings from observers on the ground and UNHCR and other aid organizations had been left to deal alone with a massive humanitarian disaster. In Sierra Leone, the civilian population, and in particular women and children, had been the chief victims of a destructive and murderous campaign of terror. Yet the international community had paid little attention and aid to Sierra Leone had been only a small fraction of the resources spent on the reconstruction of Kosovo. That would appear to bear out those who criticized the international community for favouring certain regions over others.

3. Partnership - the annual theme of the current session - was the key to lasting solutions. Partnership between Governments, the United Nations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society actors was a prerequisite for genuine human rights protection.

4. Preventive strategies must address the full range of economic, social and cultural rights, the rule of law, justice and reconciliation and should aim to put an end to impunity for the perpetrators of human rights violations. That was a collective responsibility and it was encouraging to note that some Governments were willing to engage the United Nations and NGOs in efforts to strengthen human rights protection at the national level. Moreover, a human rights perspective had begun to be integrated into all United Nations activities: early-warning systems, humanitarian intervention, peacekeeping operations and development cooperation.

5. While UNHCR and UNHCHR might have different roles, they were united in their task of protecting individuals and their rights. That was the principle behind their cooperation in the protection of displaced persons in Colombia, for example, and in seeking solutions to minority problems in Kosovo. She hoped that that cooperation would continue and would be extended into new fields. The member States of the Executive Committee had a responsibility to ensure that the ideals of the Charter of the United Nations and of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were realized in more than theory. It was the duty of the entire international community to support the work being done to protect refugees and to find effective ways of preventing a

recurrence of tragedies such as those it had recently witnessed. Lastly, she expressed her admiration for the dedication and professionalism shown by UNHCR, under Mrs. Ogata's direction, in bringing assistance and relief to refugees.

6. Mr. BUTIME (Uganda) said that the complex refugee situation in the world today required new strategies. The breakdown of nations, human rights abuses, ethnic conflicts and civil strife where the distinction between soldiers and civilians had disappeared were causing mass population displacements to which no continent was any longer immune. The Kosovo crisis had, however, clearly shown that, given the political will, the international community had the capacity to cope with such situations. Similar attention needed to be paid, however, to other equally grave situations, such as those in Sierra Leone and Guinea. The plight of refugees should be a common concern, irrespective of nationality, race or country of origin. His delegation hoped that the Executive Committee would reaffirm that position.

7. Africa today hosted more than 6 million refugees. The economic and social impact of large refugee populations on least developed countries such as Uganda were enormous. Assistance to refugees should be integrated into national development programmes so that the local community could also benefit. Uganda therefore welcomed UNHCR's support for regional initiatives - the most recent being the Lusaka Agreement - to find lasting solutions to the Great Lakes region's problems. His Government was holding discussions with UNHCR on a strategy to ensure refugees' self-reliance and thereby their dignity. But the best solution to the refugee problem was still voluntary repatriation.

8. International protection was one of UNHCR's principal objectives and should be strictly observed by States. It was therefore regrettable that, out of xenophobia, certain States applied the 1951 Convention in a restrictive manner, so that many genuine refugees became the victims of the very system that was supposed to protect them. Similarly, the neutrality of refugee camps should be maintained and preventive measures adopted to mitigate the negative impact of refugee inflows. To that end, UNHCR, in partnership with the main development agencies and NGOs, should extend technical assistance to the Governments of host countries. UNHCR must also take into account the economic and social problems of host countries in its repatriation and reintegration programmes.

9. Mr. SUNGAR (Turkey) said that the classic definition of the refugee, as contained in article 1 of the 1951 Convention, was no longer applicable today. The post-cold war period had seen a radical change in the nature of armed conflicts, which were, rather, internal conflicts with external backing. In addition, globalization, by contributing to the breakdown in social protection and unemployment, gave rise to a strong sense of insecurity, which in turn caused an increase in the number of migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees. It was growing harder to distinguish between refugees fleeing persecution and violence and migrants in search of better economic opportunities. That confusion had reached such a pitch that even those who had violated the principles of the Charter of the United Nations could be granted refugee status - including terrorists. There was an urgent need, therefore, to review the principles governing refugee status determination and the exclusion provisions of the 1951 Convention in the light of present-day reality.

10. It was encouraging to note that there had been a steady decrease in the number of refugees during the past two years. There was no room for complacency, however, the Kosovo crisis having shown how suddenly refugee movements could begin. He commended UNHCR's performance during the Kosovo crisis, as illustrated by the humanitarian evacuation programme to which Turkey had made a significant contribution by taking in around 20,000 refugees in the early stages of the crisis. He hoped that the lessons learnt from Kosovo would be put to use in other regions. The complexity of the current international environment made partnership among the various actors of the international community more necessary than ever in finding lasting solutions to the problem of refugees and displaced persons. UNHCR must redouble its efforts to engage in constructive dialogue and forge close links of cooperation with all States on a non-selective basis and taking into account their legitimate concerns.

11. Mr. ALEMU (Ethiopia) said that the protection of refugees was an important principle of international law that should be scrupulously observed. Unfortunately, that was not always the case, for various reasons. One problem was the security implications of large refugee flows. Armed or criminal elements should never be accommodated in refugee camps. An effective screening mechanism should be developed, in collaboration with UNHCR, that would make it possible to identify armed elements and separate them from refugees. The international community should help host countries and UNHCR to reconcile the duty of protecting refugees with the legitimate security concerns of States.

12. Another problem was the fact that the presence of a large number of refugees aroused resentment within the population of host countries, heightened ethnic tensions and contributed to environmental damage and the impoverishment of the local economy. Once again, it was a question of reconciling the needs of innocent civilians fleeing from conflict and the legitimate concerns of their host communities. One way of doing so was to assist the local population while the refugees were there, as well as once they had left, particularly in terms of the reconstruction of damaged infrastructure and the restoration of the environment. Unfortunately, for various reasons, including what was known as donor fatigue, the response of the international community had been far from adequate and was in fact becoming a source of serious concern. The situation in Africa was a telling example. It was fortunate that the High Commissioner for Refugees had consistently spoken out with courage and dedication for African refugees, and his delegation expressed its deep gratitude.

13. Partnership should not be limited to crisis situations alone. Repatriation efforts often suffered from a lack of adequate preparation in order to create situations conducive to the return of refugees to their countries of origin in safety and dignity. Ethiopia's own experience in the repatriation of Somali refugees bore that out. Although some 74,000 refugees had already been repatriated, it had not been possible to complete the programme as planned because conditions in northern Somalia were not appropriate for the reintegration and resettlement of returnees. In the area of Ethiopia that had hosted refugees for a long time, the Government planned to carry out a rehabilitation programme, for which it would no doubt require assistance. His delegation hoped that UNHCR would play its traditional role as catalyst and that Ethiopia's partners would come to its aid.

14. Mr. LEPATAN (Philippines) said that the theme chosen for the fiftieth session of the Executive Committee was very timely. Given the complexity of refugee movements and the increasing displacement of population in all parts of the world, the importance of partnership could not be overestimated, since UNHCR could not on its own ensure the protection and safety of the approximately 21 million persons of concern to it. UNHCR must therefore work even more closely not only with its traditional partners, but also with new ones. Traditional partners - States, NGOs, ICRC, concerned United Nations agencies and refugees themselves - could help UNHCR improve its protection mandate. In addition, linkages with international and regional organizations, financial institutions, the private sector and even the military and police would bring added value to the comprehensive multilateral approach adopted in relation to the protection regime and security aspects.

15. Dynamic partnerships could also help in addressing the root causes of refugee flows, the advocacy of refugee rights, the enhancement of response capacities, the transition from relief to reconstruction and sustainable development and the provision of the required financial and material support. To that end, it would be necessary to ensure the required level of coordination if resources were not to be wasted and the problems mentioned by the High Commissioner, such as the risk of overcrowding of humanitarian space in high profile emergencies, humanitarian micromanagement or bilateralism and direct military involvement in humanitarian assistance, were to be faced. The Executive Committee and its Standing Committee should look into those problems in order to achieve a balanced division of labour, taking into account the mandates and capacities of all partners.

16. The protection of refugees, UNHCR's core mandate, had over the years become a more challenging task, partly as a result of gross violations of the institution of asylum and humanitarian principles and partly because of the growing security problems of refugees and humanitarian personnel. Although well-coordinated multilateral action by concerned parties was extremely valuable, it fell mainly to States to protect refugees. However, States' cooperation required a climate of confidence to be built by UNHCR and its partners, and that meant it was essential to maintain the non-political, impartial status of UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies.

17. His delegation took the opportunity to congratulate the High Commissioner for her efforts in that regard and for her concern to give equal attention to every refugee situation. He also pointed out that, in the Balkans, greater emphasis should be placed on reconciliation as a starting point for refugee repatriation. As an impartial, non-political humanitarian agency, UNHCR was in the best position to pursue such a strategy.

18. Recent crises, including those in Kosovo and East Timor, had shown that, given sufficient determination and political will, the international community was able to mobilize in order to respond to the challenges. He reaffirmed the Philippines' support for UNHCR, paying tribute to all the humanitarian workers who had lost their lives in the course of their duties and commending UNHCR staff for its dedication to the cause of millions of refugees.

19. Mr. AL AGHBASH (Sudan) said that refugees' problems were becoming more and more complex: every country, without exception, was experiencing difficulty in applying the provisions of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol when granting refugee status and

observing the principles of international protection. Sudan was determined to comply with all international and regional conventions by protecting refugees and providing them with decent living conditions. However, those instruments would have to be revised in order to take account of the many developments of the past 50 years. In that regard, his delegation referred to the declaration and recommendations adopted in December 1998 in Khartoum by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Ministerial Meeting on Refugees, Returnees and Displaced Persons in Africa. He urged the international community to implement the principle of burden-sharing for refugee protection and security in order to support the most affected host countries.

20. With regard to the means of strengthening partnership, he was obliged to point out that the volume of assistance provided by donor countries was continually diminishing: the budget allocated to Sudan, for example, had fallen from its previous level of US$ 40 million to reach US$ 4.5 million in 1999, while the number of refugees had fallen by only 20 per cent. Refugees should enjoy not only legal protection, but also economic support, particularly as, according to recent studies, most refugees were a non-productive sector of the population; projects designed to help them should concentrate on developing their skills so that they could make a useful contribution to the host society and, on their return, to their own country. He could only deplore the tendency to apply double standards in humanitarian aid: aid levels differed from continent to continent and country to country; intervention should be based on objective criteria, yet aid to Africa was not commensurate with its needs.

21. Sudan would spare no effort to encourage the voluntary repatriation of hundreds of thousands of refugees who had been in the country for some 30 years and he urged UNHCR and the international community to place the issue at the top of its agenda. The refugees' stay had adversely affected Sudan's environment and natural resources and was putting increasing pressure on the infrastructure, especially in urban areas. UNHCR should also pay special attention to the protection and security of refugee children: he urged the Executive Committee to condemn the practice of pressing minors into wars and on to battlefields and to take action to return them to their families.

22. Sudanese refugees in neighbouring countries should also be given all necessary attention and be protected from armed attacks on their camps, in accordance with the UNHCR Executive Committee's recommendations in that regard and OAU's appeals. His Government wished to be able to make direct contact with such refugees in order to inform them of developments in Sudan and obtain information on their conditions: he therefore urged the international community to facilitate such initiatives in neighbouring countries.

23. Ms. ANDERSON (Ireland) said that the United Nations system was being severely tested by humanitarian challenges and that partnership and teamwork were essential in order to respond. There could be no distinction between political, security, humanitarian and human rights concerns. It was therefore of the utmost importance for the High Commissioner for Refugees to brief the Security Council regularly on key humanitarian concerns, so that the Council could keep that dimension fully in focus when formulating comprehensive approaches to conflict resolution.

24. Within the United Nations system, the partnership between humanitarian and human rights action also needed to be continually strengthened: the two agendas were tightly interwoven. The efforts being made in preparing for the forthcoming World Conference against Racism, for example, should have an impact on the welcome given to refugees in many countries. Gross violations of human rights such as the systematic expulsion of whole populations and representatives of the international community and the media - as had happened in Kosovo and East Timor - were also violations of humanitarian law. Accountability for such violations was not only a matter of justice, but also a necessary ingredient in the process of reconciliation and in prevention strategies: impunity would result in fresh violations and further refugee outflows.

25. As pointed out in paragraph 39 of document A/AC.96/923, the reinforcement of partnerships for protection could give rise to problems and tensions. UNHCR had to take account of the political and human rights context while maintaining its status as an impartial humanitarian actor. New challenges were arising in the partnership with NGOs, as had become evident in recent months, insofar as it was more difficult for UNHCR to exercise its coordination responsibilities when NGOs were in competition, however closely it might be working with them; the dilemma needed to be addressed frankly. And internal partnership within organizations themselves made it possible to learn from the various crises. She encouraged UNHCR to continue that learning process.

26. Lastly, she said she was pleased that the partnership between her own country and UNHCR was stronger than ever, since a UNHCR office had been opened in Dublin and Ireland's financial contribution continued to grow. Ireland was engaged in the crises in Kosovo and East Timor, but was also involved in UNHCR's efforts in various regions of Africa, to which it had also given humanitarian aid.

27. Mr. AZAD (Bangladesh) said that the choice of theme for the current session's debate was highly appropriate in view of the complex situations in Kosovo and East Timor and the growing risks faced by humanitarian personnel. A collective international response to humanitarian crises was now urgent.

28. Protection issues were central to UNHCR's mandate, but depended on States observing the principle of non-refoulement. Countries could not shoulder protection responsibilities on their own, particularly as many of those most affected by refugee flows were developing countries. In the absence of any established mechanism for burden-sharing and partnership, responses to refugee problems were largely governed by the media spotlight. Protracted refugee situations were pushed into the background and became the responsibility of the host country.

29. The issue of refugees was a particularly sensitive one for Bangladesh, remembering the exodus that had accompanied the country's emergence into independence and the two occasions when refugees had arrived from Myanmar. Their presence had placed severe strain on the infrastructure, the environment and the local population. He urged the Government of Myanmar to facilitate the return of those still remaining on Bangladeshi territory and UNHCR and the donor community to continue working in close partnership with Bangladesh, since the refugees were the responsibility of the international community.

30. Temporary asylum could not be anything more than an interim arrangement, for, if it was not, it could have an adverse effect on both refugees and the host country. Approaches that aimed to promote "refugee self-reliance" by creating opportunities for generating income required careful examination; they were no panacea. His delegation believed that local integration was not a viable solution in developing countries. Partnership efforts should be directed to enabling refugees to return home safely.

31. Bangladesh fully shared the view that UNHCR's performance depended on its cooperation with a wide range of partners. Such collaboration ranged from emergency humanitarian relief to long-term development cooperation. UNHCR could act as catalyst in partnership with development agencies and mobilize the resources and technical support necessary to mitigate the negative impact of a large refugee presence in developing countries. UNHCR should also work with human rights groups in order to defuse the social tensions and xenophobia to which refugees and asylum-seekers frequently fell prey. Coordination with UNHCHR was useful in that regard, along with coordination with peacekeeping mechanisms within the United Nations system. There was a need for coordinated efforts at the international level to take preventive measures to deal with the root causes of refugee flows. However, the neutrality of humanitarian activities must not be compromised and the mandates of the various organizations must not be crossed.

32. Mr. NEGROTTO CAMBIASO (Italy) said that the series of complex crises that had given rise to refugee flows in various parts of the world in the last few years had brought very diverse responses from the international community: fairly adequate in some cases and less so in others. Pressure generated in the field by an emergency should not deter the international community from strategic considerations; in that regard, there was every reason to welcome the elaboration of new concepts within UNHCR. The choice of theme for the current session of the Executive Committee related to protection and security and called for concrete commitment in order to obtain tangible results.

33. It was universally acknowledged that UNHCR's role had in many respects become more and more central in humanitarian intervention in international crises, while the efficiency of its field operations had constantly improved. That progress had been illustrated by the High Commissioner's visit to Indonesia and the arrival of UNHCR emergency aid to East Timor even before the international peacekeeping force had been deployed there. That was an example of the extent to which UNHCR could operate at all levels with remarkable speed and competence. Coordination with other entities as well as in other important areas had also seen constant improvement, which was to UNHCR's credit. In several operations, the speed of response had been a decisive factor. That had been the case in the Kosovo crisis, from which a number of extremely important lessons could be learned. Italy's involvement in Kosovo had been prompt, coherent and unprecedented in scope, and that had resulted in a rapid response enabling the needs of the affected populations to be met. UNHCR, in its turn, had demonstrated an impressive ability to adapt despite the enormous scale of the task.

34. He shared the concerns expressed by the High Commissioner on military involvement in humanitarian operations, although he believed that, in emergency situations of unexpected dimensions, such as the Kosovo crisis, the immediate assistance provided by the military contingents of some countries had made it possible at least to meet the most urgent needs of the people affected.

35. Mr. JAKUBOWSKI (Poland) said that there could be no proper security or effective protection without partnership. Partnership could be defined in the first place as coordinated international action involving a wide range of actors. The latest humanitarian crises in Kosovo and East Timor - both of unprecedented magnitude and urgency - had shown that no single organization or country had the technical, human or logistical resources needed to meet the challenge. During the Kosovo crisis, Poland had for the first time taken part in a massive international humanitarian intervention, with the help of its partners, and foremost among them, UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Poland strongly supported UNHCR's efforts to strengthen its cooperation and partnership with other international actors.

36. Secondly, partnership could be a way of enabling the authorities, institutions and citizens of a host country to take care of asylum-seekers. An indispensable requirement in such an approach was respect for the dignity of the persons concerned. That was possible only once the necessary legal procedures had been adopted and enforced and the population of the host country had an appropriate attitude to foreigners who faced intimidation in their home countries. However, it was important not to forget that successful adaptation in what was sometimes a totally different social environment also depended on the attitude of the refugee.

37. Thirdly, partnership could be described as equal participation by all countries concerned in drawing up international standards for the treatment of refugees. Migrations and refugee policies were interdependent issues. The participants in the Stockholm Conference on International Migration, Development and Integration had suggested that European countries should formulate and introduce a new policy on the problems of migration and refugees. The international community should tackle the root causes of the problem more vigorously. The implementation of such a policy would not be easy and would require partnership between migrants' and refugees' host countries and their countries of origin. In tackling the problem, humanitarian aid was not enough; development assistance and cooperation in building civil society and democracy were also essential.

38. Mr. NOIRFALLISSE (Belgium), endorsing the statement made by Finland on behalf of the European Union, drew attention to four aspects to which Belgium attached great importance, the first two of which were the reinforcement of linkages for effective, realistic and responsible collaboration among the various actors at the international, European, national, governmental and non-governmental levels and the reaffirmation of the basic principles of humanitarian law, from which there could be no departure. Belgium was a land of asylum and an area of law and liberty and, precisely in order to avoid the risks of social exclusion and rejection, it tried to apply a realistic, concrete policy in the areas of immigration and asylum, which were those where citizens had the highest expectations. In response to that need, the Treaty of Amsterdam had transferred jurisdiction for such matters to the European Union. Belgium's approach to asylum and immigration questions must therefore be focused, realistic and concrete, but, if it was to be comprehensible, it must also be open. That was a question of credibility at a time when ordinary

citizens were highly cynical and the risks of political failure were clear. The policy must also be balanced, in the sense that asylum should be granted to those who met the Geneva Convention criteria following a speedy process with judicial guarantees that would ensure objectivity and reliability. It should also be a global policy that took account of the fact that the problem had begun in the country of origin and that there were problems with emigration, as well as on arrival at the foreign border. The desired common approach required solid information on those problems. Lastly, his delegation reaffirmed Belgium's solidarity with Africa and was pleased to note that the draft budget for the year 2000 allocated one third of UNHCR's operational resources to that region.

39. Mr. DIAZ DAVILA (Nicaragua) said that the UNHCR repatriation and resettlement programme for Guatemalan refugees had officially ended the previous day. It had been the last in a series of such programmes implemented in the subregion as an extension of the International Conference on Central American Refugees (CIREFCA).

40. In document A/AC.96/923, UNHCR invited delegations to share their own experiences and make suggestions on how partnerships could be further expanded or strengthened. Nicaragua supported all the points made in the document with a view to ensuring the success of partnerships, particularly the reference to involving directly affected communities through dialogue and cooperation. As indicated in the same document, the programme that had emerged from CIREFCA had been an example of partnership for protection. With the support of UNHCR and various countries that took an interest in the region, the countries of Central America had participated in the programme and UNDP, donor countries, regional organizations, national, regional and international NGOs and representatives of local communities had also been associated. Against that background, quick impact projects had been set up and they had helped thousands of returnees, particularly women, to resettle in their community and make a vital contribution to the process of national reconciliation and economic development.

41. He emphasized the importance of the transition from relief to development, which depended on sufficient resources being provided. Partnerships also had a decisive role to play in the transition phase, consolidating the resettling of those concerned by helping them integrate into working life and providing psychological and social support.

42. Despite the efforts made at the international level to help refugees, displaced persons and others in need of international protection, countless violations of human dignity and human rights would continue to be committed as long as discrimination, violence, hunger and the separation of families endured, with all the despair that brought. There was therefore a duty to continue to work together in a framework of partnerships among the various actors in order to ensure the protection of all refugees and the preservation of their dignity.

43. Mr. PELEG (Israel) said that Israel was currently changing its legislation in various areas in order to bring it into line with the provisions of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, to which it was a signatory. Provisions relating to refugees and asylum-seekers were to be introduced into the legislation governing entry into Israel. The Ministry of Justice intended to propose the establishment of a body that would be responsible for granting refugee status on

the basis of an examination of applicants' files. The preparatory work was being carried out with the support of UNHCR, which had offered to act as an information centre and provide training for Israeli staff recruited to that body.

44. Every time a crisis broke out somewhere in the world, with its resultant movements of refugees, Israel, despite its limited resources, helped in efforts to relieve their suffering. In recent years, Israel had been involved in setting up field hospitals in Rwanda and, more recently, in Kosovo, where Israeli doctors, nurses and medical auxiliaries had carried out their humanitarian mission with great dedication. Israel intended to continue to work in that way in the future, in cooperation with UNHCR, in particular.

45. Mr. BORCHARDT (Observer for the European Commission) said that the Treaty of Amsterdam gave the European Union new responsibilities in the area of asylum. In order to carry out those responsibilities, the European Commission proposed to establish useful, effective and fair standards that responded to the needs of member States, nationals of affected third countries and European citizens. On the threshold of the twenty-first century, the international community already had a key international standard: the 1951 Geneva Convention and its Protocol, as well as the institutions that supported it and well-developed asylum regimes. Nevertheless, it was necessary to make an additional effort in order to safeguard the right to asylum. The European Commission therefore welcomed the idea of strengthening partnerships, the subject of the annual theme.

46. Declaration 17 annexed to the Treaty of Amsterdam provided for consultations on matters relating to asylum policy to be established with UNHCR and other relevant international organizations. The Commission would consult regularly with UNHCR on proposals in the area of legislation. Exchanges of views had already taken place: since 1997, on the subject of submission of European Commission proposals on temporary protection, and, since March 1999, on its discussion document on common standards on asylum procedure. Such exchanges of views would continue, addressing, inter alia, the responsibility to consider asylum applications within the Union, the EURODAC register, the definition of refugee, the notion of persecution by non-State agents, family reunification and reception conditions for asylum-seekers. More generally, the issue of a single European asylum system would have to be more thoroughly discussed.

47. The Commission fully supported the comprehensive approach to the issue of refugees put forward in document A/AC.96/923. It was actively involved in the high-level group on asylum and immigration, one of whose main emphases was the idea of a migration policy based on partnership and co-development with countries of origin. The structural availability of the European Union's analysis and crisis prevention capabilities and economic, foreign, security, development and humanitarian aid policies should help in moving towards a European asylum policy. The proposed partnerships should be implemented taking full account of the values of each partner.

48. One of the pivotal points of the partnership between the European Community, through its humanitarian office (ECHO), and UNHCR was humanitarian aid. The European Union was UNHCR's leading donor. Cooperation between ECHO and UNHCR was satisfactory, although there were some difficulties. The general framework agreement adopted in summer 1999 by the

United Nations and the European Commission should facilitate that cooperation and, more specifically, make it possible for UNHCR to sign ECHO's new partnership framework agreement. ECHO was itself founded on the idea of partnership, both with international organizations and with NGOs. Everything required for humanitarian action fell within its scope: saving lives and protecting. In the future, it intended to prioritize the protection aspect and respect for international law. In consultation with other members of the international community and the United Nations, ECHO had, on the basis of a discussion document submitted by the Commission in May 1999, embarked on a study of the relationship between humanitarian law and human rights. With regard to the safety of humanitarian personnel, he hoped that an integrated security strategy for humanitarian operations would very soon be adopted and called for more inter-agency security agreements; he urged donors to become more directly involved in security issues. The European Commission reaffirmed its commitment to giving continuing support for UNHCR's vital role in dealing with humanitarian crises by providing stable funding and closer coordination.

49. Ms. BELLO de KEMPER (Observer for the Dominican Republic), acknowledging the importance of the chosen annual theme, said that she wished to refer to two points already mentioned by other delegations. First, it was the responsibility of States of origin to create the conditions for their nationals to return in dignity. Moreover, most refugees returning to their country helped to create better living conditions. There was no need to look further than the contribution Dominicans had made on their return to the country after years of exile, more than 30 years before. Secondly, there was a need for close partnership among States, international organizations and civil society, not only in response to humanitarian emergencies, but also in order to prevent them. Prevention programmes should incorporate a call to all States to include a culture of tolerance and respect for human rights and the principles of humanitarian law in their education curricula. In that way, it would be possible to promote a culture of peace and educate generations of citizens and politicians who would use dialogue to resolve differences or, in other words, to reduce the number of root causes of such refugee outflows as the almost biblical migrations being witnessed today. Those ideas were similar to the ones to be discussed at the forthcoming meeting of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement with a view to asking States to include humanitarian law in their education curricula.

50. Mr. ASTANAKULOV (Observer for Turkmenistan) said that the work UNHCR had done in Turkmenistan was a good example of the kind of fruitful, balanced action that could be taken to deal with what were now urgent practical tasks. The Programme of Action of the CIS Conference was being implemented and progress had been made both on the ground and in terms of legislation. Over the past three years, 6,000 Tajik refugees in Turkmenistan had returned to their country thanks to close cooperation with UNHCR. In July 1997, Turkmenistan had enacted legislation on refugees and acceded to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol. In March 1998, it had signed a cooperation agreement with UNHCR. In May 1999, a working group had been asked to prepare recommendations for the Government on the implementation of the legislation on refugees and it should have completed its work by around 15 December. Recently established national NGOs had taken part in the preparation of the current session of the Executive Committee. Such results were encouraging.

51. Turkmenistan drew donor countries' attention to the two kinds of problem it faced. First, it had to help more than 15,000 refugees to integrate into society and required the financial and

technical help of the international community to do so. Secondly, the political and economic changes taking place in the region of Central Asia, the Caspian Sea and neighbouring countries presented grave threats which needed to be taken into account if a humanitarian disaster was to be avoided. Turkmenistan, as a neutral country, could play an important role in resolving the internal problems of Afghanistan and Tajikistan. On the domestic front, reforms were envisaged that should ensure the development of the economy and a society based on the rule of law. Such efforts were of considerable historic importance and Turkmenistan hoped that the support of the international community would not fail.

52. Mr. SARRA (Observer for the Syrian Arab Republic) said that the refugee problem was a humanitarian issue with political and geographical dimensions which required solutions based on cooperation and on UNHCR efforts. He thanked UNHCR for establishing the Al-Hol camp, where thousands of Iraqi refugees were still living, and for the material assistance and aid in voluntary repatriation that UNHCR had provided for refugees living in towns. He welcomed the cooperation between UNHCR and the Federation of Arab Red Cross and Red Crescent societies. The presence of a large number of Palestinian refugees under UNWRA responsibility was a heavy burden for Syria. He reaffirmed Syria's full support for UNHCR as it carried out its noble mission.

The meeting rose at 5.30 p.m.